

## Editorial

# My Last Editorial—A Cautionary Tale?

As I stare down 2022 (which some people are referring to as “2020, too”), it is undoubtedly a time of change (although, in spite of political rhetoric, the pandemic has NOT ended). As there will be a guest editorial in May and a new editor in July, this is my last editorial—and for many reasons, it feels very final. Not only will I be transitioning away from the journal when my term is up, but my day-to-day work is also in question due to a major reorganization at the institution where I have worked for 25 years. With these two (what feels like) momentous changes, I am both looking back to reflect on what I take from this experience and looking forward to figure out how to engage with the “new normal” (although, honestly, my response to this phrase is either to reach for a glass of wine as part of a drinking game or throw a shoe at the person who says it).

## Lessons Learned

I have had the chance to reflect on my time as editor through a bit of a different lens. Working on the transition with the editor designate, Kristen Totleben and having recent conversations with a colleague who is about to take the reins of another academic journal that is arguably more progressive in its content, it has provided a chance for me to reflect on my experience and articulate some definite Dos and some recommended don'ts as well as some cautions.

1. While the responsibility of the journal lies with the editor, the credit goes to the authors. As a steward of the journal, the editor should try to help the author make the best instance of the article and develop their understanding of the process and mentor them (if needed) in their research and writing.
2. That said, it is the authors and the reviewers (including the Editorial Board) who help shape the evolving scope of a journal—and to remain relevant to the discipline and to practice and be an active leader in scholarly dialogue, evolve it must.
3. Someone commented to me that being editor is like being on a pedestal—in cases where there are times that an editor must advocate or engage, I believe that is true. For the most part, my belief (or perhaps my style) is that the editor is behind the scenes—the journal should be at the forefront in spite of the emphasis on the cult of personality that social media breeds.
4. For all of this, the editor is not alone—it took me awhile to realize that I didn't have to manage it all by myself (and I will note that ACRL staff were there with me at every step of the way when I asked for assistance—I could not have done it without David, Dawn and Tim as well as Stephanie Davis-Kahl and Eric Johnson). The Editorial Board is also there—a huge brain trust of expertise, experience and perspective that, just like the reviewers and the authors, have a stake in the profession and in the journal and can help shape it. As the *C&RL* editorial board will agree, I have become a big fan of short-term taskforces (and they have all embraced this with graciousness and commitment).

5. Referring back to #3, it should be noted that being on a pedestal makes one a bigger target. I absolutely encourage constructive and professional dialogue—and in the future, hope that the journal will be in a position to host such an interactive platform. That said, I did counsel the 2 new editors that they need to decide how they will engage with social media—if at all. While much of the commentary is positive, the 10% (or less) that is more targeted with personal remarks and vitriolic statements can really take over your headspace. I have been fortunate to have an experienced social media editor who has been instrumental in navigating these issues and manage the social media presence of the journal. Ellen—you have been a great advocate for the journal, quite aside from saving my sanity.
6. There is a perception that editors know everything (or think they know everything?)—neither of which is true. One of the reasons that I identify myself as the shepherd of the journal is to underscore that I have a trust to take care of it, to usher papers and authors through the process in a way that is both positive and transparent and that the ultimate product is a reflection of those authors, reviewers, and board members who have invested in this effort. I have tried to balance humility and the ability to learn from any experience with the courage to guide the journal and tackle issues.
7. It is also my position that an editor should try to remove barriers if at all possible. These may take many forms—from involvement of underrepresented perspectives to streamlining processes or guidelines to include new authors (e.g., Kristen has been working with some community college librarians to bring their experiences to the journal, and there has been some discussion about style). The fundamental goal is that the journal is a platform with many voices.
8. It is probably apparent that, particularly during the pandemic, my editorials have become more and more casual—this is somewhat stylistic and somewhat deliberate. In an effort to try to be candid about my own experiences and struggles, I hope that it connects with readers who are having similar experiences but may feel like they are alone. I have tried to use this platform to increase the approachability of the journal.
9. Each time, I thought my being selected was a long shot but took a “What the heck” attitude (as “they” say—although originally, it was apparently Wayne Gretzky—“you miss 100% of the shots you never take”). In working with professional students, I find the ones who get what they want are those who strive, who try and fail and try again. I encourage librarians, authors, practitioners to take those shots—you have nothing to lose (except a little skin of your ego) and may potentially gain a lot.

Finally, Julie Gelfand made a comment in a meeting I was in a couple of years ago—it stayed with me because it is so true: “Editing is a way of life.” After more than 12 years as an editor/co-editor for 3 different academic journals—Julia’s comment was a mic drop moment. And it is one for me now.

### **Taking the “Path Forward”**

As I turn the page (yes, yes—an editorial cliché) on what has been significant developmental experience, there are some current events where I work that will, no doubt, carry their own lessons. As one of my colleagues says, “I have all sorts of feels about this”—but I will keep this constructive and briefly speak to this case as an editor, independent researcher and practitioner in the hopes that it may offer others some insights.

Librarians are creatures of change—in spite of any reputation to the contrary, it is clear that academic librarians are flexible and patient as they have dealt with nothing but change which has accelerated over the past few decades. The method of change, though, is a major factor—having edicts handed down with little to no involvement in the decision is frustrating to say the least; having our contributions questioned and our roles diminished is demoralizing. As with all change, the possibility that something will be taken away is alarming—in this case, it is not just the title or status (which was earned) but the ability to determine how to engage in the work, to participate with the professional community, and to contribute to the knowledge and scholarly dialogue. In short, it is the threat to any academic freedom that librarians may have.

But, let's be honest, the academic freedom that librarians have—at specific institutions and in state where there is no labor presence—is at the discretion of the administration (university, system, legislative and executive). It is not just academic librarians facing this threat. Just read the *Chronicle of Higher Education* or *Inside Higher Ed* to witness instances where academic freedom falls to political interests. As in many states, particularly in the South<sup>1-3</sup> the culture of accountability that began in the 2000s has devolved to a culture of suspicion of higher education: faculty are under attack from all directions<sup>4</sup> and governor's orders or chancellor's priorities are keenly felt.

The changes that are being enacted, sadly, are not surprising. There have been any number of warning signs over the years that presage these changes—both at national and at local levels. In fact, a university in the same system experienced similar events a few years ago, as documented by Thomas Kreneck.<sup>5</sup> There is some irony in his warning that his institution was just the beginning.

Abigail Goben, tweeted, “Note the part where they are “turning the library into a service/admin unit” — Faculty Tweeps- are you paying attention to this? Or was your first response “oh it's Just the Library.”<sup>6</sup>” She makes an excellent, if sharp, point—while other units or institutions are circling the wagons to defend their own interests, the winnowing of faculty status is occurring. In the meantime, it is a cautionary tale that I hope some libraries and librarians—and perhaps others in higher education—can learn from.

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## Notes

1. Colleen Flaherty, "Tenure Under Threat in Georgia," *Inside Higher Ed*, October 4, 2021, <https://www.inside-highered.com/news/2021/10/04/tenure-under-threat-georgia>

2. Jeffrey C. Isaac, "Florida Is a Five-Alarm Fire for Academic Freedom," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 31, 2021, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/florida-is-a-five-alarm-fire-for-academic-freedom>

3. Keith E. Whittington, "The Intellectual Freedom that Made Public Colleges Great Is Under Threat" *The Washington Post*, December 15, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/12/15/academic-freedom-crt-public-universities/>

4. Alexander C. Kafka, "Academic Freedom Is on the Ropes," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 27, 2021, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/academic-freedom-is-on-the-ropes>

5. Thomas H. Kreneck, "Degrading Professional Librarian Status at Texas A&M University Corpus Christi, 2007–2015—A Policy History," *Progressive Librarian* 46, Winter 2017/2018, <http://www.progressivelibrariansguild.org/PL/PL46/012kreneck.pdf>

6. Abigail Goben, Twitter tweet, December 15, 2021, <https://twitter.com/hedgielib/status/1471147208296873986>